Sakya Buddha University

3404 Westminster Ave.

Santa Ana, CA 92703

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By ***KimLoan Vo***

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KimLoan Vo
Candidate
May 09, 2025

APPROVED:

Ven. Thích Huyền Châu, Master _____

Professor Tenzin Dorjee, Ph.D _____

Professor Victor C. Gabriel, Ph.D _____

I hereby declare that Thesis has been submitted as an exercise for a degree at any other institution, that it is entirement my own work.

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Abstract

Women in Buddhism

By

KimLoan Vo

This present research is an attempt to clarify the women's roles in the society and religion, and to praise their positive contribution to the family's harmony, a good community and a peaceful world according to Buddhist concepts. It also emphasizes the the necessity of Vajrayana women practitioners' guidance to explore the Dakini energy for a non-dual view realization of bliss and emptiness.

The comparison of Buddhist practitioners during the primitive age of Buddha time and the modern age reveal some differences between bhikkhus and bhikkhunis. A deep analysis of Buddhist traditions also exposes the contradictory views of women's roles and functions between Theravada and Mahayana traditions. A study of the Vajrayana tradition with examples of the latent yoginis reveals their great compassion, wisdom, and spiritual accomplishment through their unique "*Chöd*." practice. A narrative of the Tibetan sacred male-female union explains the equal role of women in achieving a divine energy necessary for the melting of ego into Cosmic Bliss.

This project is a bricolage and because of that references and research are not in one place and however the author will strive to be thematically consistent.

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I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who has helped shape this thesis for the Master's degree in Buddhist Philosophy. At seventy-four, I can only be content with keeping good health and spending time in daily prayers. Returning to school, learning to browse the internet, and writing assignments while my memory degrades are real challenges.

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I also appreciate my spiritual gurus for their continuous blessings. I often wake up with new ideas; even while swimming or doing the dishes; new thoughts, paragraphs, and syntaxes pop up in my mind. They are my late root Guru, Geshe Gyeltsen Tsultrim, now reincarnated as Tulku Tenzin Thardoe, His Holiness Dalai Lama, His Eminence Lati Rimpoche, the late Geshe Tenzin Dakpa, the late Jampa Kelsang Rimpoche, Sharpa Choeje Rimpoche Ngawan Jorden, and especially His Eminence Zong Rimpoche for his dear kindness. They are always in my mental continuum in this lifetime and future lives.

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This thesis was completed with the support of my family: my husband Loc, my son Linh, for your consistent efforts in providing me space and caring for this writing.

Most importantly, I thank the Dakinī Mother for her continual blessings and protection.

May women practitioners be free from suffering and obtain every resource they need to embody their highest spiritual aspirations in our world.

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Chapter One: **Personal Backgrounds & Methodology**

Personal Backgrounds and Possible Biases:

As a Vietnamese woman born in a country of war, being raised in a traditional Daoist family who tolerated the male dominance at home, and receiving a French liberal education at school, I have witnessed all the sufferings of life and death, poverty, fights for survival, impermanence, sexual discrimination, domestic abuses, civil unrest, violence in war zones, and also at the same times, peace in churches and temples. My father was a successful businessman, so we were considered an upper-middle-class family with four maids and a chauffeur in our four-story house. Besides our summer vacations at the mountain villa or the beaches, I did not find happiness at home; my parents often quarreled, which made me wonder about the causes of *suffering* in my early childhood. My grandmother taught me to recite the mantra of Buddha Amitabha, so I started recitating mantras while walking, cycling, and swimming, or when I saw car accidents, people fighting on the streets, and when I heard bombardments in the outskirts of Saigon. During the Tết holidays, while my father and brothers played cards, I recited mantras and meditated. My heart always cried for the poor people with only a plastic wrap on their shoulders for protection from the rain, for the widows who grieved the loss of their soldiers' husbands on the battlefields. I have been praying for world peace from since a young age.

Four significant events that happened in my life have caused a change in my life to a more spiritual path: After the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, we lost our country to the communists. We all became poor. The loss of our country, wealthy families became inadequate, and our social and economic lives were all transformed into a deep nightmare. Thanks to my

mother's bravery, who faced the new situation without fear, disguised as a country woman planting rice on my grandparents' land, we were able to keep our house in the city. At the same time, all families involved in the old government were forced to leave their homes in the capital to the countryside for rural labor. The Communist conquerors confiscated their houses. Most of the people tried complex ways to escape from the country. My mother lost a lot of gold to traffickers for my brothers to leave our country, but their escape failed, and they were taken to prison. Realizing our country's *impermanence* and the *cause and effec*t that resulted from our *collective karma*, I tried to pursue a spiritual path. Hearing the miraculous benefits of the *Lotus Sutra,* I wished to have that book (most of books and music related to the old government were confiscated and burned), and miraculously, somebody gave it to me.

Upon finishing the recitation of that book, a pregnant woman[1] looking for someone rich to support her and her four-year-old daughter, came to me. She had the information of the traffickers, and my mother had money. So the three of us, disguised as poor people, went on a small fishing boat along the Saigon river to a meeting point where we were transferred onto a larger boat of 12 meters long with 109 people already packed as sardines. At that moment, when the fishing boat sailed out of Vietnam, I cried. I felt *empty*, grieving the separation of my family and friends, anxious and unsure about the future, worried about the risk of death on sea, the risk of being attacked by the Thai pirates, the risk of famine and thirst because the fishing boat carried more people than oil and water. While people around me were seasick and vomited on each other, I kept saying the mantras. Many ships sailed by, but none of them stopped. One woman gave birth to a baby girl the next night with my assistance and a doctor. As a virgin at 30 years old at that first time, I witnessed the pain of a woman in labor. When her birth canal dilated, I felt the atrocious pain in me, like the urge to use the bathroom, even though we had had

1 See Chaper 4, p 30. "*Dakini Power*"

no food for the last two days. Is it the *compassion* per se that I developed for that woman's pain in labor? Two days later, we were rescued by an Italian commercial vessel, thanks to their Catholic heart when they saw the newborn baby girl.

My second event was that on one night close to the Thanksgiving holiday, I was attacked by Black intruders armed with a gun and a flashlight while I was alone at my house with my three-year-old son. When they ripped off my nightgown, I started screaming for help, and they asked me to open my mouth so they could calm my voice with a piece of my nightgown. Maybe another woman who has a peaceful life would be terrified at that tragic moment, but since I have witnessed deaths and casualties during the war, I was calm. For that reason, I was not scared of their guns. Being helpless at that tragic moment, I just thought of killing myself rather than letting my body be stained. So I bit my tongue hard, ready to die. By instinct, I uttered, "Nammo.." My intruders did not let me finish the mantra; they snatched my head until I fell and fled in the same way they entered the house through the bedroom window. I had more than ten cuts on my head. I was summoned a few months later to the court to testify because I was the only person present out of seven home invasions. Also, I learned that the family, who had a mother over seventy years old who was being sexually assaulted and killed, has pursued the case so hard that the police have to work consistently to catch the killers. That event caused me to build up more faith in Buddha's mantras. Years later, during one meditation session, Buddha inspired me, saying that he had spared my life so I could continue my spiritual path to enlightenment.

My third event was on April 29, 1992. We lost our business due to the Los Angeles Riots after Rodney King, a Black man whom white police officers attacked, and I was eight months pregnant with our second child. Knowing we had missed our mortgage payments, the tenants

lived free for several months until the bank foreclosed on our two rental houses. My husband was depressed about losing business and rental income. The image of my mother bending over the rice field with her hands, which used to be well-polished, deepening in the mud, always reminds me of the strength of motherhood. Like her, I cannot fail. I had to be strong to nurse my newborn baby and care for my six-year-old boy. I worked two jobs, came home hungry and exhausted daily, and slept while nursing. My angel baby, Linh, did not like bottled milk; he only waited to be nursed at night. Many times, I fell asleep while driving. I could have died in an accident. I prayed to Buddha to keep me alive to raise my sons. Now, I reflect on that trauma and that hardship, and I believe there is a Dakini energy that can transform strength from stress in me.

The fourth event that inspired my dedication to practicing tantra was in 2013. My Tibetan guru, Geshe Gyeltsen Tsultrim, passed into nirvana in a rainbow body[2], a rare and unrealistic phenomenon in the United States. His body was shrunk to the size of a three-year-old kid, unrotten but still pliable after seven days of being carried back to his monastery in India.

I must humbly admit that as a mother, and through the pain of being underestimated in my family during my childhood and teenage years, and even now in America, my husband, still with his Asian male dominance perception, I can express some biased opinions toward men of low faculties. These events led me to practice and to complete the Buddhist study and a Master's degree.

2 According to tantra, only vajra masters can dissolve his elements into emptiness at clear light at the time of death. His consciousness leaves his coarse body in the form of a rainbow that appears on the sky. The LA Times posts the picture of a double rainbow on Long Beach blue sky, unusual phenomenon on their newpaper.

Methodology

The methodology of this research was an ethnographic literature review. It compared Buddhist women practitioners in the early and modern ages and included comparisons between traditions like Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. This thesis highlighted historical exploration, critical analysis of sexual discrimination, women's capacities, and the latent spiritual power of the Dakinis, who embodied the tantric practitioners.

Primary sources:

The research relied on primary resources, such as those used in Buddhism for Women classes in North America. These were:

- *'Women of Wisdom'* by Tsultrim Allione,
- '*Women under Primitive Buddhism'* by Motilal Banarsidass,
- *'Buddhist Women Across Cultures'* edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo,
- *'Dakini Power, Twelve Extraordinary Women Shaping the Transmission of Tibetan'* by Michaela Haas
- *'Death, Intermediate State, and Rebirth*' by Lati Rimpoche
- Google search

<u>The Four Perpestives on Women in Buddhism across cultures</u>

In addition, over the years of growing up between three different cultures, Asian, French, American, and Tibetan, and being married to a Catholic husband who still embraces the male dominance concept, I have developed a broad view of the correlation of feminism with cultures and religion; therefore, I can classify my analysis into Four Perspectives on Women in Buddhism across cultures:

- The *Buddhist women in the early Age:*

  Historical perspective on the social expectations surrounding the traditional feminine roles, status, and identity of women in early Buddhism.
- The *classical scholastic view of women in Theravada tradition:* Contradictory views of women in their respective roles and functions in Theravada practice.
- The *Modern View of Buddhist Women in Mahayana tradition:* the impact of Feminist Buddha images on women's spiritual lives.
- The *spiritual Dakini power in Vajrayana tradition*: Connection with the "*Yidam*"; How to generate the Sacred Feminine's energy/wisdom? How do we realize the Dakini Power for non-dual bliss and emptiness? How can the sacred male-female union be perceived as a method for achieving bliss and emptiness?

This theoretical framework enables the different elements of theory and practice within these three traditions to be historically contextualized and more readily related.

Chapter Two**: Introduction: Feminism**

Throughout history, women have faced significant challenges in maintaining their essential roles in society and religion. However, their roles have evolved over time, sparking discussions in many cultures about the potential for women to attain enlightenment and liberation in a female body.

Before I begin my narrative about *Women in Buddhism*, I would like to cite some gender differences. Biological, psychological, and cultural influences shape gender differences. Men can dominate in muscular strength and physical authority, but women have beauty, patience, and perseverance. Examining the world's religions, specific images of women arise repeatedly. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, in her book about "*Buddhist Women across Cultures"* cited two images of women. First, there is the image of a woman as a temptress, the incarnation of evil. She appears as the witch, the serpent, and the siren. She is a danger to man's spiritual progress - a force that can lure a man with false promises of fulfillment only to bring him to destruction. Second, there is the image of a woman as a tigress and a mother. She symbolizes fierce protection, birth, regeneration, and mature, self-giving love. The first image is ferocious, while the second is compassionate and life-giving.

1. Woman as a temptress[3]: Buddhists' ultimate goal is liberation or enlightenment. The Threefold higher training in Buddhism is discipline, meditation, and wisdom to achieve the seven factors of enlightenment. Challenging lifetimes of attachment, aversion, and ignorance requires pure motivation, dedication and perseverance. The training in discipline leads to the

3 Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. "*Buddhist Women Across Cultures".* State University of New York Press. 1999

training in meditation, which leads to wisdom. Per the *Theory of the five Hindrances*, monks are trained to subdue their sexual desire by meditating on the woman's body as:

- Impure and lustful, not reborn in the god Sakra
- Indulgent in lust, not reborn as Brahma
- Arrogant and not reborn as the king of Mara
- Endowed with 84 latent qualities, not reborn as a universal sage king
- Due to the three poisons and negative karma, she cannot reach enlightenment.

So, monks are trained to view the woman's image as a temptress. For example, when Ananda asks why women never sit in court, embark on business, or reach the "essence of the deed," the Buddha is said to reply:

"Women are uncontrolled, Ananda. Women are envious, Ananda. Women are greedy, Ananda. Women are weak in wisdom, Ananda[4]."

Sexuality is linked with the craving for sensual pleasure that binds humans to rebirth. In many texts, the danger in relationships between men and women is well known because of the potential for such things as possessiveness, control, jealousy, and violence. Hence, monks are taught to view the sexual and sensual with revulsion as a manifestation of craving and egoism. I disagree with the "*Theory of the five hindrances"* that applies only to women. Both men and women without moral discipline can have those hindrances. That is a stigma image of a woman as beautiful but dangerous, and the cause of sexual feelings in men. Women alone cannot be blamed when coupling requires both genders.

2. Woman as a mother [5]: The *Karariiya Metta [6] Sutta* praises the mother's qualities, emphasizing her willingness to protect her child as if he/she were her own life. This portrayal of motherhood plays a significant role in shaping the women's perceptions in Buddhism.

4 *SN 5.2*
5 Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. "*Buddhist Women Across Cultures".* See 1. P. 53
6 SN v. 143ff.

"*A woman child, O lord of men, may prove even better offspring than a male, for she may grow up wise and virtuous. Her husband's mother is a reverent, true wife. The boy that she might bear may do great deeds and rule great realms. Yea, such a son of a noble wife becomes his country's guide.* [7]"

When I nursed my baby boys, seeing my milk pouring into their tiny mouths, I felt a special bond with them. I thought that they were helpless and needed my protection and care. For how many lifetimes have I drunk my mother's milk, and for how many children have I been nursing? Motherhood and filialhood are very sacred bonds. The mother is always willing to sacrifice for her child's future. Princess Yasodhara, Prince Siddharta's wife, renounced motherhood by letting Rahula join the Sangha out of attachment, but for a good, sacred cause. In India and Asia, mothers play an essential role in child development. Over centuries, the he mother's self-sacrifice, her readiness to fight to the bitter end, if need be, for the life of her child, despite her safety, is a common trait.

Even in the animal world, we can see a common trait among elephants, birds, snakes,…. A mother's love for her child is often represented as more intense than a father's love. A Vietnamese proverb ("*Công cha như núi Thái Sơn, nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra*")[8] compares the father's love to a big mountain and the mother's love to a stream that travels continuously from the creek to the ocean.

In the pre-Buddhist days, the status of women was low and without honor. The birth of a baby girl brought no joy, even in a royal family. A daughter was nothing but a source of anxiety to her parents for the reason that it was a disgrace and inauspicious as well if they could not marry her, yet if they could, if she was barren/nulliparous or could not give birth to a male heir, she was disgraced in both families. Women were given little authority at home and no part in public activities. If widowed, she submitted to her father again or to her son (per the *Dao*

7 *SN 1.85*
8 Bojjhangasamyutta (Linked Discourses on the Awakening Factors): Metaphor example

religion). Society looked at women as sex toys to men; the mother's position in the family was just for childbearing and housework. During Buddhist ritual ceremonies, the women's places were always behind the men, and it was women who served meals to the men. However, in religion, the view of the child's devotion to their parents is highly respected. Matricide or patricide is considered a terrible crime. Universally, we have seen many women who love and sacrifice for others, like Mother Teresa in India.

3. Woman as a tigress: A woman's character is multifaceted. She can be as sweet as a cat, with her coquettish attitude toward her lover and kindness toward her children. However, she can become jealous, brave, and even fierce when protecting her family or country. This portrayal of 'woman as a tigress' presents a different aspect of women's character and societal roles. Vietnam's history[9] always praises the heroism of "*Hai Ba Trưng"* (The Trưng sisters), who led a rebellion against the Chinese Han rule during 40 CE, and " *Lady Triệu"*, who was compared to *Joan of Arc* (France), for she fought against the Eastern Wu dynasty's invasion in 248 CE. The latter was known for her bravery and her famous quote:

"*I will not bow my head to be a slave. I would rather ride strong winds, crush the wicked, and free my people*!"

4. Woman as a Buddhist woman: Women who realize impermanence and the causes of suffering seek liberation. With perseverance and dedication, they engage in a spiritual path like men. In the *Angutta Nikaya*, Buddha Sakyamuni recognizes that women can possess the same spiritual qualities as men for *arahant-ship* (examples of Bhikkhuni Visakha, who founded the temple Migāramātupāsāda in Savatthi, Queen Mahā Pajāpatī Gotamī, and Khemā, who was the

9 Ngô Sĩ Liên, "*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư, Complete Annals of Đại Việt*". 1479. Wikipedia

former queen of King Bimbisara). These women, as *arahants,* found themselves worthy of respect because they embodied wisdom and knowledge beyond the sexual sphere. Reasons included renunciation practices, leaving behind the craving (*tanhā*) inherent in a male-dominated society, and moving towards acceptance as spiritual seekers. This was rare during the primitive Buddhist era.

Similarly, in Nepalese tradition, the young female chosen is the **Kumari**, also known as the *Living Goddess*. She is a prepubescent girl selected from the Newar community, particularly from the Shakya caste, to be worshiped as the manifestation of the goddess **Taleju** (a form of Durga). The Kumari is revered in Nepalese and Hindu-Buddhist traditions, symbolizing divine feminine energy and power.

Chapter Three: **Women in Early Buddhism**

1. Sociological Perspectives on Gender:

According to pre-Buddhist thought, a woman's plain duty was to marry. Women did not receive much education, and they were primarily assigned to time-consuming housework, herding or agricultural tasks, and raising children. Since Buddha's time, they have enjoyed more freedom. Buddha taught dharma to both householders and their wives[10]. Some women who felt no will for marital status could join the *Bhikkuni order*. In the *Angutta Nikayā,* Buddha recognizes that women can possess the same spiritual qualities as men to become arahats, illustrating his belief in gender equality regarding spiritual potential. Initially[11], he hesitated to allow women into the Sangha order, but later, due to Ananda's advocacy and the persistent efforts of his aunt and foster mother, Queen Mahapajapati Gotami, who by her considerable social status, conducted a march of five hundred noble women to convince him, walking shaved head and barefoot nineteen miles from Kapilavastu to Vesali. These noble women were successfully admitted to the Sangha through their strong efforts. I guessed that it was tough for Buddha to allow women to engage in the acetic life like men because, in the primitive age, women could not go alone to meditate in the forest, and society still valued the concept of male dominance. His Sangha oragnization was pretty new to people of all castes, especially the rulers,

10 Banarsidass, Motilal. "*Women under Primitive Buddhism"*. New Delhi, 1930

11 **Anguttara Nikaya 5.229**, where the Buddha states that women are **"untamed, envious, greedy, and weak in wisdom"** when speaking about five weaknesses of women.

whose stereotyped perception of women was that they had to submit themselves to their fathers, uncles, brothers, and sons, so Buddha set the *Garudhamma rules:*

2. The Garuddhama Rules[12] are: (1) even though the time since her ordination may be as long as one hundred years, a nun must pay respect even to a monk who has just been ordained into the Buddhist Order; (2) she must not slander a monk; (3) she must not accuse a monk of any misdeed; (4) she must receive from a monk the entire commandments for nuns; (5) she must confess her offenses before the assembly of monks and accordingly make amends; (6) she must ask for instruction from a monk every half month; (7) she must not spend the summer retreat at a place where there are no monks; and (8) after the summer retreat she must confess her offenses to a monk and make amends.

While establishing the Bhikkhunīs order, the Buddha revealed the equality between the two genders in the Buddhist sangha with equivalent responsibilities and benefits. Due to the difference in genders, specifically in the aspects of physical forms and cultures, these extra sets of rules balance the roles between bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs, supplement the nature and prejudiced deficits of each role, and settle two co-existing paths for monks and nuns to reach liberation from the defiled mundane world. While senior Bhikkhunīs must show respect to even a novice Bhikkhu, they were guaranteed a safe environment to practice Buddhist Dharma, with protection and guidance from the other monks. While receiving respect from nuns, Bhikkhus must consider Bhikkhunīs their mothers or sisters, who deserve the warmest compassion in a regular family, and encourage them to attain Nirvana. Therefore, even at the starting point of the liberation path, Buddhism offered equal opportunities for beings regardless of gender. Thus, the "Bhikkhuni order" began along with the Garudhamma rules.

12 https://www.nichirenlibrary.org/en/dic/Content/E/38 or The Chapter X of the Cullavagga (inside the Vinaya Pitaka -one ot the Tripitaka baskets)

However, the order does not exist in Tibetan tradition. Scholars believe this resulted from many factors, which this thesis will discuss later. Recently, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has allowed female Tibetan novices to take the same Geshe exam (Geshema) as monks. However, Tibetan nuns who want to receive the Bhikkhuni ordination have to go to Taiwan, where that tradition is allowed for nuns.

3. Roles of bhikkhunis and lay practitioners and the contradictory views of women and their respective roles and functions.

The priestly Brahmin caste system dominated Indian society during the pre-Buddhist period; religion was just a complex system of rituals[13]. Being associated with people born into the lower castes, women were not alowed to read sacred texts and could neither worship nor perform sacrifices on their own. The Manu Code of Laws[14] adversely influenced social attitudes toward women, especially in the higher castes. A woman could not attain nirvana through her own merit but only through obedience to her husband. She has to worship her husband as a god. In patriarchal countries like China, Vietnam, Korea, Japan, and India, the firm's will for a male heir to continue the family lineage was very strong. In Indian society where rituals are very important, people express even a stronger desire for sons' birth, for the reason that only the son could perform[15] funeral rites and ensure the future happiness of the deceased. With the Buddhist movement, gradually, that concept of male favoritism diminished. The idea of spiritual equality for all beings [Buddha's words, "*All sentient beings possess an enlightened essence, a Buddha nature*."] has a significant impact on social structures and how women are viewed worldwide.

13 Banarsidass, Motilal. "*Women under Primitive Buddhism*". New Delhi, 1930
14 Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. "*Buddhist Women Across Cultures*". Chap 2. P 68
15 Banarsidass, Motilal. "*Women under Primitive Buddhism*"

On the spiritual level, both human genders can attain liberation by keeping the precepts and following the prescribed path.

Their economic and social status initially made it hard for women to follow the ascetic path. They could not support themselves and meditate alone in the forests. The presence of single, independent women following religious careers of their own was still a daring innovation. Most women who joined the Bhikkhuni order in Buddha's time were from noble families like Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī (Buddha's foster mother), Khema (King Bimbisara's queen), Sundarī Nandā (Buddha's half-sister), princess Kisā-Gotamī, and princess Yasodharā (Prince Siddharta's wife)[16]. Gradually, some women of all castes followed the Bhikkhuni Order, a new culturally accepted lifestyle, free from masculine dominance and patriarchal society, and relieved from unpleasant domestic drudgery.

4. Impact of feminist Buddha(s) images on women's spiritual lives

Generally, when a child has any pain, they run to their mother for comfort. As human beings, we seek protection from the divine beings. Mostly, the image of the mother comes to mind first. In Christianity, people pray to their *Holy Virgin Mother*. Greek legendary honored goddesses like *Athena, Minerva, Demeter, and Persephone*… Lakota (Native American) tradition worships the "*White Buffalo Woman"*[17]. Chinese people pray to *Guan Yin,* Vietnamese people to " Đức *Quán Thế Âm" and " Đức Điêu Trì Kim Mẫu,"* and Hindu people to their Shaktis like *Parvati, Lakshmi, and Kali,* who represent the feminine divine energy, which is essential to the balance of the universe. These female Buddhas embody love, compassion, and

16 Bhikkhu Analayo: *"Daughters of the Buddha, Teachings by Ancient Indian Women". Wisdom Publications, 2019*

17 Heňáka Sápa. "*The Sacred Pipe*". 19

protection from all fears. Women who suffer the most from poverty, husbands' abuse, abandonment, and sexual assault are seeking relief by praying to the female Buddhas as a mother's arms of protection.

Female buddhas and bodhisattvas represent great love (*Mahākarunā*), bodhicitta (*Jang chub, sem ba*), wisdom (*she rab*), and empowerment. *The Great Mother Prajnāparamitā*[18] *(*deity of the Heart Sutra) symbolizes the highest understanding in Mahayana Buddhism.

* Some female Buddhas are peaceful, like Guan Yin and Tara. They hold the lotus flower, representing the mother's love, compassion, purity, and protection. *With* her right leg bent and left leg extended, Green Tara shows she is ready to step down to help those in need. *Unishā Sitatapatrā*, with multiple faces, eyes, arms, legs, and a white parasol, shows her incredible power of protection.

* Other female buddhas look fierce and even wrathful, with some ornaments or vajra weapons, like *Lion-Faced Dakini Simhamukha, Vajrayoginī*, and *Sri Hayakrīva*, the tantric deities embodying protection and love with wisdom. The benefits of praying their mantras are to remove obstacles and all hindrances of many lifetimes. Miraculous results happen in the women's lives after their fervent prayers that intensify their faith. Many women feel a deep connection to this aspect of enlightenment. I strongly connect with *Tarā* and Vajra*Yoginī,* who embody fearlessness, transformation, and independence. Through my struggles in life, I pray to them for the strength to overcome obstacles, inner growth, and spiritual power. I feel the *Dākinī power* when practicing the yogas of *VajraYoginī*, which helps me to balance energies within myself. Some women come to *Guan Yin* for fertility requests, childbirth, and caregiving. I also

18 Simmer-Brown, Judith. "*Dakini Warm Breath".* Shambhala Publications, 2001. Chapter 3. P 84

pray to *Palden Lhamo*, the wrathful female dharma protector. Ultimately, anyone, regardless of gender, can pray to female Buddhas, as they represent universal qualities that transcend gender identity. Women may simply feel a stronger affinity with these figures due to shared life experiences and perspectives.

Chapter Four: **Buddhist Women in Different Traditions**

Three Buddhist traditions exist worldwide: Theravada or Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. Four types of followers follow the Buddha's teachings: monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen.

1. Theravada Tradition:

Hinayanists follow the Theravada tradition. They learn the Vinaya from the Tripitaka doctrine (The Three Baskets). Their ultimate goal is to follow the Wordly Vehicle for their self-liberation. Their four achievements of meditation are Sotāpanna (Stream-Enterer), Sakadāgāmi (Once-Returner), Anāgāmi (Non-Returner), and Arahant (Fully Enlightened One). They practice mind training through gradual meditation and wisdom understanding. The Arahant is the one who has completely eradicated all ten fetters, or the ten hindrances, free from all defilements and will not be reborn in any realm. The Third Buddhist Council was held in India in the third century B.C.E., and it decided to dispatch nine missions abroad to spread Buddhism.[19]One mission, headed by Malinda, son of Emperor Asoka of India, reached Sri Lanka, where, within a short time, a group of five hundred women formed the Bhikkhuni order, initiated by Sanghamitta, Malinda's sister. Unlike other Buddhist traditions, countries following the Theravada tradition have no nuns component.

From Sri Lanka, Buddhism was spread to Southeast Asia through the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea by sea route. So, countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia,

19 Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. "*Buddhist Women Across Cultures".* State University of New York Press. 1999. Chp 3

and South Vietnam follow the Theravada tradition. Over time, due to wars, political instability, and lack of support, the Bhikkhuni lineage died out around the 11th century CE. Since Theravāda Buddhism follows a strict ordination lineage, once the unbroken lineage of Bhikkhunis disappeared, it was considered impossible to revive using traditional means. According to the Vinaya Pitaka rules, the monastic code requires a new Bhikkhuni to be ordained by a community of Bhikkhus (monks) and nuns (Bhikkhunis). So, since the Bhikkhuni lineage is no longer present in Theravāda Buddhism, **dual ordination cannot occur according to traditional rules**. That concept caused Buddhist women in those countries to be spiritually disadvantaged. Unlike in other religions where priests are regarded as intercessors between human beings and divine power, ordination in Buddhism is not transmitted from one person to another; instead, there are certain precepts giving by a qualified from a certain lineage, that one undertakes to keep and observe following one's own motivation, so there is nothing to prevent women from observing the precepts of novice or full ordination. Therefore, women in Asian countries who mainly suffered from the injustices caused by the patriarchal society became more motivated to pursue the spiritual path. They seek relief within their group, continuing their spiritual path despite losing the Bhikkhuni order. In Thailand, several groups of laywomen have come together to practice with devotion. They receive only the ten precepts (*Maechi*); The Thai *maechis* wear white robes as they cannot take full ordination as bhikkhunis, and they are institutionally subordinate to monks.

Theravada nuns (*Dasasilmatas)* wear light yellow or orange robes and live under the guidance of a fully ordained monk, whom they serve as their master. Many conservative heads of the *Nikayas* (monastic orders) strongly oppose nuns' ordination. Therefore, Buddhist institutions have traditionally been male-dominated in many Theravada countries like Thailand, Myanmar,

Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Laos. Without formal recognition, nuns often lack access to monastic resources, such as temples, education, and alms support. Helping to promote nuns' aspirations for liberation, Gunavarman[20], an ardent propagator of Buddhism, and some other monks encourage nuns from Sri Lanka to travel to China, Taiwan, Korea, and Vietnam, where the tradition of nuns' full ordination still exists.

According to the Mahfiparinibbana Sutta[21], the Bhikkhu Sangha can restore the Bhikkhuni Sangha by skipping the presence of nuns. Since the 20th century, there has been a revival of Theravada Bhikkhunis' ordination. In 1996, a group of Sri Lankan women traveled to Sarnath (India), or Korea to receive full ordination from Mahayanya nuns, then re-established the Bhikkhuni Sangha in their country. Some scholars, like Bhikkhuni Dahammananda[22] from Thailand, advocate for women's rights in Buddhism. Laywomen, as business owners, doctors, and teachers, play crucial roles in donating to charity, maintaining temples, and providing social services. Female Buddhist scholars and meditation teachers, such as Upāsikā Kee Nanayon[23] (Thailand), have influenced both lay and monastic communities.

2. Mahāyāna Tradition:

Chandrakīti says in the first chapter of his *Supplement* about the *Sevenfold Reasoning*[24]:

20 Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. "*Buddhist Women Across Cultures".* State University of New York Press. 1999. Chapter 2, p. 77

21 Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. "*Buddhist Women Across Cultures".* Chaper 3 p. 83

22 Bhikkhuni Dahammananda, as the first woman in Thailand to receive the full ordination in Thailand, was a highly respected scholar and professor of Buddhism at Thammasat University in Bangkok.

23 Upāsikā Kee Nanayon (1901–1978) was one of the most revered female lay meditation teachers in the **Thai Forest Tradition** of Theravāda Buddhism. She is often regarded as one of the most influential women meditation masters of 20th-century Thailand.

24 Wilson, Joe. "*Chandrakīrti's Seven Fold Reasoning".* Library of Tibetan Works & Archives. 2006

"*Hearers and middling realizers of suchness are born from the Kings of Subduers [i.e., from Buddhas].*
Buddhas are born from Bodhisattvas.
A compassionate mind, non-dual understanding, and the altruistic mind of enlightenment are the causes of Sons of Conquerors [i.e., Bodhisattvas].

We can distinguish four types of holy beings: *Hearers or Sravakas, Solitary Realizers or Pratyekabuddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Enlightened Beings.* The first two are *Hinayanists,* and the last two are *Mahayanists. Hinayans* are motivated by their desire to attain liberation from samsara alone. The highest state that Hinayanists can reach, once they have entirely extinguished greed, hatred, and delusion, and there is no more karma left to propel another existence, is called *Nibbāna without remainder (Parinibbāna),* a state beyond all conditioned existence. Unlike beings who still have attachments, arahants do not continue in the cycle of birth and death. In contrast, *Mahayanists* are motivated by the wish to attain liberation from samsara for the sake of all living beings, the *bodhisattva ideal*, where all beings, regardless of gender, can achieve Buddhahood. Asian Buddhist practitioners' goal of practice is for their consciousness to be led to the Pure Land of Amitabha upon death.

i. In the Bhikkhuni Sutta[25], women are depicted as capable of achieving *arahantship.* When the demon Māra attempts to discourage Bhikkhunī Soma from her spiritual path by saying,

"A woman, with her two-fingered wisdom,
is not capable of attaining the profound Dhamma."

She challenged Mara with her words, asserting that enlightenment depends not on gender but on the mind's ability to overcome attachment and delusion.

"*What does being a woman have to do with it, when the mind is well-composed,*
When knowledge exists, seeing rightly into Dhamma?"

25 *SN 5.2*, part of the *Saṁyutta Nikāya*.

Still, some passages reflect the social attitudes of the time, suggesting that women's spiritual capacities were limited compared to men'd due to their lower economic status, family responsibilities, emotional decision-making, and education.

ii. The *Avamtasaka sutta (Flower Garland Sutra)* emphasizes that the Buddha nature pervades gender differences.

ii. The *Saddharmapundarika Sutra*[26] contains a metaphorical story of the Dragon King Sāgara's daughter, who attains Buddhahood in her male form.

"*Then the nāga girl suddenly transformed into a man, completed the bodhisattva practices, and attained the perfect enlightenment of a Buddha.*"

(*Reflection*: Through her practice of the Lotus Sutra, she attained Budhahood, she could have kept her animal form too, it is not necessary to transform into a male form).

iii. Contradictory, as an affirmation of women's potential to achieve enlightenment without needing to be reborn as men. Some Mahāyāna sutras[27], such as the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* and the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra,* challenge gender distinctions in spiritual practice. The *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* teaches that since enlightenment is based on realizing the pure, luminous nature of the mind rather than bodily characteristics, both men and women have the same potential for awakening.

iv. The *Vimalakīrti Nirdésa Sūtra*[28] also echoes this idea in the famous story where a goddess demonstrates that gender is an illusion by temporarily transforming Vimalakīrti into a woman. That story justifies the non-dual nature of awakening, affirming that all beings can realize the truth regardless of their gender identity.

v. Many dharma texts and male leaders still reflect patriarchal views that see women as obstacles to enlightenment. Despite cultural barriers, the core Buddhist teaching is that all beings,

26 Lotus Suta. Chapter 12. Devadatta

27 Paul, Diana. "*Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahayana Tradition".* University of California Press. April 1985

28 Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra. Chapter on the Goddess (Chapter 7)

regardless of gender, have the potential to attain enlightenment (nirvana)[29]. At the same time, the feminine is sometimes idealized in the form of wisdom (*prajñā*), goddesses, or bodhisattvas like *Guan Yin* (Avalokiteshvara in feminine form) and *Tarā.*

vii. Nuns still suffered from male distrust because of their relatively emancipated position. Bhikkhunis cannot hold any leading roles in funerals or significant rituals. They serve meals to Bhikkhus and eat after them. However, Buddhist laywomen, maybe due to their financial and social status, who serve patrons in monasteries, are often presented much more positively than nuns

29 Aṅguttara Nikāya (AN 1.279-283)

Chapter Five**: Women in the Vajrayana Tradition**

Vajrayana (also known as Tantric Buddhism) builds upon Mahayana philosophy but introduces esoteric techniques (tantras) designed to accelerate the path to enlightenment. It maintains the Bodhisattva ideal but asserts that, through specialized methods, one can attain Buddhahood within a single lifetime[30]. In order to practice Buddhism, one has to be reborn with the precious human form. Pabongka Rimpoche[31] praised the benefits of a precious human rebirth:

"*Humans are a good candidate for monastic vows; they can develop the most bodhicitta and become enlightened in one lifetime and one body through the secret tantric path."*

A precious human life here refers to the eight freedoms and the ten endowments. The eight freedoms are 1) freedom from being born in the hells, 2) in the animal realm, 3) from the hungry ghost realm, 4) from the god realm, 5) in a place where there is no dharma teaching, 6) in a time where no Buddhist teaching, 7) born with physical disabilities, 8) from the wrong views. The ten endowments are the five (personal) and the five related to environmental conditions. The five personal endowments are: 1) born as a human being, 2) in a place where Buddhist teachings are available, 3) not having committed the five heinous negative actions, 4) having good physical traits for receiving dharma teachings, 5) enduring faith in all the three baskets and the lamrim system . The five endowments in relation to others are: 1) Access to dharma through authentic teachers, 2) Gurus are alive to continue the lineage, 3) Strong faith in the mainstream, 4) Teachings are followed, 5) Favorable conditions like benefactors available for financial support.

30 Padmasambhava, Terton Karma Lingpa & Gyurme Dorje. "*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*". Viking. 2006, Introduction commentary.
31 Pabongka Rimpoche, Trijang Rimpoche & Michael Richard. "*Liberation in the Palm of your Hand".* Wisdom Publications. Boston, 1991, Chapter 5, p 273-275

In the tantric context, the human form is most suitable with chakras, channels, and inner winds for meditation and consciousness transference with chakras, channels, and inner winds.

Vajrayana is a later development of the Mahayana tradition, with more intensively elaborated in its practice methods, philosophy, and attitudes toward the body, rituals, ornaments, and reality. A qualified Guru must initiate tantric practitioners from an unbroken lineage tradition to practice a particular meditational deity (*Yīdam).*

Historically, Tibetan society was predominantly patriarchal. The women's lives were shaped by their rich cultural heritage, shamanic religious traditions, and the unique geography of the Himalayan mountains and plateaux. Their roles centered around household and agricultural work in rural areas, where they managed homes, cared for livestock, made butter and cheese, wove wool, raised children, or traded precious stones and dharma objects in cities like Lhasa. Despite hardships, Tibetan women are often admired for their resilience, deep spirituality, and warmth[32].

Historically, Vajrayana, like other forms of Buddhism, has faced similar challenges regarding gender equality, particularly in monastic structures. While women have always been part of the religious community, the Bhikkhuni Sangha was never transmitted to Tibet. As said earlier, they are no longer chattels of their fathers and husbands but are still subject to monks for receiving teachings. Nuns keep only 36 novice vows, may live together in small nunneries close to their natal home, often lacking resources for education, spiritual instruction, or even basic necessities like food, shelter, and clothing. Tantrika women may live in monastic compounds or with family members, remaining in retreat in the mountains as yoginis like *Machik Lapdrön*[33]

32 Appleton, Naomi. "*In the footsteps of the Buddha? Women and the Bodhisattva Path in Theravada Buddhism".* Indiana University Press. Pp 33-51 Spring 2011
33 Simmer-Brown, Judith. "*Dakini Warm Breath",* chap3 p.83

and *Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo*[34]. In recent decades, there has been a movement to recognize and empower female practitioners. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has expressed support the full ordination of women and the recognition of their spiritual capacities. However, since there is no Tibetan Bhikkhuni order, some nuns must travel to Korea ore Taiwan for full ordination.

Vajrayana places significant emphasis on the divine feminine. Female deities are represented by diffe*rent name*s known as the *Secret Dakini*: she is the Mother of All Buddhas (Gyalkun Kyeyum); she is the Great Mother (*Yum Chenmo*); she is the Dharmakāya Great Mother (*Prajňāpāramitā*) (Choku Yum Chenmo); she is the All-Creating Sovereign (Kunje Gyalpo or Gyalmo). Even while she is in a vast space, she exemplifies the "mother" context in Tibetan Buddhism.[35]

There are four main images of the feminine presented in Tibetan tantra:

- the peaceful and beautiful mother-type *Tārā;*
- the semi-wrathful and dynamic figure of the Dakini who represents the philosophical concept of cutting our delusions as *Vajrayoginī;*
- the wise and active dakini of the Dzogchen tradition, *Simhavaktra,* is a fierce dakini with a snow lion face. It represents the philosophical concept of harmony and the realization of reality, similar to the Chinese belief in the balance of *yin-yang* (male and female).
- And, unique in Tibetan Tantra, there are images of the sexual union of the father and mother embracing as *yab-yum,* in which the father represents bodhicitta, and the mother represents wisdom. That is only the symbol of the mystical union of the active energies of male-female, the emblem of the indivisibility of emptiness and compassion, to overcome the false dualism of the world of appearances in the striving toward spiritual enlightenment. There are presented female

34 Mackenzie, Vicki. "*Un ermitage dans la neige".* Carisse Busquet, 2003

35Simmer-Brown, Judith. "*Dakini Warm Breath",* chap3 p.89

images that are sexual and spiritual, ecstatic and intelligent, wrathful and peaceful. They can be sharp and insightful, even angry, and still celebrate our womanhood.

i. The Mother of All Buddhas

Per the Three Aspects of the Path, formulated by the great Tibetan master of the 14th century, Je Tsong Kha Pa:

"If you do not have the wisdom
Which cognizes the way things are,
Even if you have cultivated renunciation
And an altruistic mind of enlightenment,
You cannot sever the root of cyclic existence.
Therefore, make an effort in the means
Of realizing dependent arising"

which are Renunciation[36] *(Nekkhamma / Ngangjung* in Tibetan), Bodhicitta (Awakened mind - *Jangchub Sem*), and Correct View (of emptiness - *Yangdakpé Tawa).* Women choose the spiritual path, as an alternative to women's servitude, a renunciation of marital status. In contrast to the "mother" principle presented as the mother goddess in other traditions, the Tibetan Buddhist understanding is somewhat different. Because the material world and forces of nature look empty and transparently luminous phenomena, the mother principle is associated with *emptiness* (*sunyata)* and the wisdom that sees the fundamental truth of how things really are. Ven. Chagdud Tulku Rimpoche[37] has said:

"Knowing the nature of emptiness nondualistically is liberation. Whether you call it emptiness, the absolute, or the dakini makes no difference. All are liberating".

36 Je Tsong Khapa. *"Lamrim Chenmo, the great treatises on the stages of the Path to Liberation*", ,Shambhala Publications, 1988

37 Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche is a highly respected master of the Nyingma tradition. He taught Varyana to the West.

Upon his Second Turning of the Wheel of Dharma, Buddha introduced The Heart Sutra, or the *Prajňāpāramitā-sutras* of Indian Mahayana, which refers to wisdom or "penetrating insight *(prajnā*) that is perfected or has "gone beyond" (p*ā*ramit*ā*), which means that it has transcended concept, expectation, or conventionality of any kind. Tibetan tradition personified *Prajňāpāramitā*[38] as a female deity, the Mother of the Tathagatas, the nurse of all-encompassing wisdom, the transmitter of the realization of all buddhadharmas, and the world's creator. Why is she associated with *emptiness*? We must realize that all phenomena are inherently existent, unborn, unproduced, and without end. Our experience in life can be said to be dreamlike because nowhere in the dream is true existence. The concept of *súnyata* in Tantra is more explicit than in the Mahayana tradition in an experiential and esoteric way. Practitioners visualize themselves as deities (yidams) which are not external gods, but manifestations of one's own mind, arising from emptiness and dissolving back into it. Tantra means continuity. It refers to the continuity of the absolute nature that pervades all phenomena and to the continuity of the primordial, luminous nature of the mind. Tantrayana can also be called *Mantrayana*. Practitioners say thousands of mantras daily. Through their speech, they can feel the vibrations of their windpipe and their vitals, and in a subtle way, the airflow within their channels; by that way, enhanced with yoga moves (*tsa lung*), they can purify their elements through self-generated with their *Yīdam,* believing in the secret wisdom potential of their body elements associated with the five Dhyanī Buddhas visualization, sadhana, and mudra[39]. They can even cure their sicknesses. Through secret practice and keeping their tantric vows (*Samay*ā), they can dissolve with the pure-essence deity phenomena, subdue their impure elements, and allow the pure essence to manifest. With

38 Simmer-Brown, Judith. "*Dakini's Warm Breath, The Feminine Principle in Tibetan Buddhism"* Chap 3, p.85

39 Norbu, Thinley. "*Magic Dance, the Display of the Self Nature of the Five Wisdom Dakinis".* Shambhala. Boulder, 1999

enthusiasm and perseverance in solitary practice, the reward can be wisdom showered by light flowers from the merit field of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Gurus, Yiddams, and Dharma Protectors. Their gross and subtle elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and space can be purified. They can feel their body as luminous, and their ordinary conceptions can be transformed into unobscured wisdom reality.

ii. The *"Dakinī Power*"

While Sutra discourses disparage women as temptresses for men when they need to subdue their passions, Padmasambhava's role was pivotal in shaping Tibetan Buddhism when he introduced tantric teachings (or Esoteric Buddhism) to Tibet in the 8th century, blending Indian tantric teachings with shamanic culture and religious practices. As a core aspect of his spiritual practice, Guru Rimpoche's esoteric teachings involve balancing the male-female energies. It was a skillful method of non-dual concepts within the practitioner's mind and experience, exploring the harmony between complementary practices for the union of bliss and emptiness. It emphasizes the *Dakinī Power.* The Tibetan word for *Dakinī* is *"Khandromā," which is most literally translated as "she goes through the sky" or "sky dancer."* [40] There is a notable difference between Buddhist and Hindu tantra[41]. In Hindu tantra iconography, the Great Mother, or "*Sakti,"* is the active and creative character. At the same time, the Tibetan system attributes the dynamic method to the male (*upāya)*, and the female is associated with emptiness (*sunyāta*) and profound wisdom (*prājna)*[42]. *Renunciation* practice in Tantrayana is viewed as a transformation of our body, mind, and desires into tools (or method) for enlightenment.

40 Simmer-Brown, Judith. "*Dakini Warm Breath".* Chapt 1, p52
41 Allione, Tsultrim. "*Women of Wisdom".* Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, New York, 2000. P 89

42 Allione, Tsultrim. "*Women of Wisdom"*

Contrary to Sutric discourse, which sees our body as impure, a tantric practitioner views it as a sacred vehicle for spiritual awakening with a formulated mandala including all deities and their symbolic meanings of the wisdoms. Therefore, this method *(Upayā)* uses images of male and female deities to represent the father's compassion and the mother's wisdom. The sacred art of Tibetan tradition offers unique, symbolic designs in the form of thangka deity images, sand mandalas, and wall murals.

The "*Dākinī Power*" represents the female energy, the secret level, the most subtle and profound, and the basis of all manifestations. Although often thought of as feminine, that energy is gender-inclusive (both male and female) and beyond gender (neither male nor female) [no-dual concept, not one]. Tantric practitioners activate and integrate both forces within the individual. In sacred biographies, the Dakinī is depicted in a personified manner as an unpredictable, semi-wrathful, dancing spirit-woman who appears in visions, dreams, or the everyday lives of yogins or yoginis. When she sees the practitioner's proper intention and pure mind, she unlocks the Dakinī code[43] so the secret teachings can be revealed to the practitioner's mind through tantric empowerment or dreams. The fruition of Vajrayana's practice is inaccessible without her blessings.

iii . The Three Buddha Bodies (*Kayās)* and the *Five Wisdom Dakinīs*

In Buddhism, people believe that death is not the end. It's only a transition to another life. The conscious mind passes through different or intermediate states called *bardo*[44], each offering a chance for liberation or rebirth. To attain liberation, or a better rebirth in a human body, Tantric practitioners meditate daily about the death process, transforming it into the three paths by visualizing the dissolution of the five gross elements[45] to achieve the three *kayās*. The three

43 The Dakini Code: Lotus-Born Master and the Event Horizon. Directed by Laurence Brahm
44 Bardo is the transition stage from death to rebirth.
45 Lati Rimpoche & Jeffrey Hopkins. "*Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth*". Pp 29-38

objects of meditation on the Paths are the bases of purification by transforming death into the Truth Body (*Dharmakayā)*, the intermediate state or bardo into a Complete Enjoyment Body (*Sambhokayā*), and birth into an Emanation Body (*Nirmakayā*). Associated with five elements, we can transform the poisons of our mind into the five wisdoms. The Five Wisdom Dakinīs[46], consorts of the Five Dhyanī Buddhas[47], are fierce, ecstatic, and compassionate beings who challenge the ego, destroy illusions, and guide us toward awakening. By reciting the mantra of the blue *Vajra Dakinī* (water element)*,* we can subdue our anger and cultivate the *Mirror-like wisdom*; with the mantra of the yellow *Ratna Dakinī* (earth element), we can subdue our pride and develop the *Wisdom of equanimity;* with the mantra of the red *Padma Dakinī* (fire element)*,* we can subdue our desires and cultivate the *Discriminating wisdom*; with the mantra of the green *Karma Dakinī* (air element), with can subdue our jealousy and cultivate the *All-accomplishing wisdom*; with the mantra of the white *Buddha Dakinī (*space element), we can subdue our ignorance and cultivate the *Wisdom of Dharmadhatu.*

This chapter oulines the perspectives of Tsultrim Allione, Judith Simmer-Brown in the Vajrayana tradition, integrating the mystic dakinī figures in meditation to achieve wisdom.

Lati Rimpoche taught us the tantric analysis of the elements' dissolution at the dying process and the transition to rebirth.

46 Buddha Weekly: Five Buddhist Wisdom Dakinis: Dharma Activities including Chod, with Mantras beautifully chanted.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUOOD95WrBU&t=1019s.

47 Rinpoche Khenchen Thangu. "*Understanding the Five Buddhas*". Snow Lion. 2011

Chapter Six**: The Female Tantric Deities**

Other female Buddhas and enlightened figures associated to *Prajnaparamita* include *Green Tara, Vajrayogini, Machi Lapdrön, Yeshe Tsogyal, Princess Mandarava,* and *Samantabhadrī.*

i. *Tārā,* the mother of All Tathāgatas (*Jetsun Drolmā*)

The Goddess Tārā was born from the heart of Avalokitéshvara in the eon known as 'all-pervading'[48]; she became the "*Mother of all Buddhas*"[49] when all the Tathāgatas of the 10 directions had consecrated her. In the eon of the Potala Mountain, Ārya Avalokitéshvara intoned Tara's Tantra and mantra 10 million times, so she became more powerful to help sentient beings. She is the Protectress from the 16 fears (Fear of enemies, enemies, elephants, fire, poisonous snakes, brigands, prison walls, ocean waves, dread of flesh-eating ogres, leprosy mischief of Indra's Angels, poverty, losing relatives, vajra missiles, and ruination of one's aims). Many miraculous stories about Tara saving people's lives and possessions are Avalokitéshvara's deeds. There are 21 Taras[50]. The most popular are the Green Tarā, who embodies compassion and protection; the White Tara, with seven eyes, who embodies longevity; and the Red Tara, holding the arrow, which shows fierceness for protection. Tibetan people say her mantras daily; they think of her as another emanation of Avalokiteshvara in a female body.

48 Tāranātha, Jo Nang & Templeman, David. "*The Origin of Tārā Tantra".* Library of Tibetan Works and Archives. 1996. P. 2
49 Tāranātha, Jo Nang & Templeman, David. "*The Origin of Tārā Tantra".* P. 3
50 Buddha Weekly. 21 Taras powerful Dharani Mantras in Sacred Sanskrit as taught by Buddha, beautifully chanted https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-xDf4t6tZ8

ii. *VajraYoginī*[51], The Queen of Tantra:

Vajrayoginī is the principal female deity of the Chakrasamvara Cycle of Tantras. The name Vajrayoginī can be broken down into two parts: "vajra" and "yoginī," whereas the first represents the indestructibility of enlightenment, and the second means a female practitioner who attained enlightenment through the yoga practice. Furthermore, Vajrayoginī embodies the "passionate cosmic female", because the female body is more 'universal' than the male body since the female body contains, gives birth to, and nurtures mysteries of creation and generation; and 'passionate' because, when passion is freed from ego-grasping, it becomes a force for connection, communication, and expansion. So, even though she is a female Buddha, both male and female tantric practitioners like to practice the VajraYoginī saddhanā because this yīdam is easily visualized with only one face and two arms, different from other deities' images, which are more complex with multiple faces and arms; by prophecy, if the practitioner can purely keep their *samaya* with at least 400,000 mantras, the *Yidam* can lead to the *Khechara Pure Land* (*Kha Chö Gönpa*) in three consecutive lifetimes. VajraYoginī is a tantric deity embodying wisdom in a fierce, transformative form. While Prajnaparamitā represents absolute truth, VajraYoginī represents the direct path of transforming desire through esoteric practices. According to the unsurpassable Practice Vehicle (*Anuttara-yoga-yāna*)[52], she is depicted on four levels of meaning:

- On the secret level, she is the manifestation of fundamental aspects of phenomena and the mind, and her power is intimately associated with the most profound insights of Vajrayana meditation.

51 Pabongkha Rimpoche & Gonzales, David. "*The Extreme Secret Dakini of Naropa*". Wisdom Publications, 2020

52 Simmer-Brown, Judith. "*Dakini Warm Breath".* Shambala Publications, 2001. Introduction p8

- In her most essential aspect, she is called the formless wisdom nature of the mind.
- On an inner, ritual level, she is a meditational naked and flamboyant deity, visualized with her hands holding vajra weapons, her standing or dancing position, and her ornaments as the personification of qualities of Buddhahood. Her face is adorned with five skulls representing the five wisdom Dakinīs, her necklace of thirty-two skulls symbolizing the thirty-two Sankscrit alphabet representing the thirty-two inner Dakinīs of her body mandala, her khavangha (vajra scepter) on her shoulder representing her illusory consort, her left skull cup of blood and intestines representing the ambrosia of immortality, her right hand holding a hooked knife symbolizing her fierce determination to cut away belief in an ego, her right feet stepping on the red Kalarati demoness's breast symbolizing the control over desires and her left feet stepping on the demon Bharava symbolizing the ignorance elimination.
- On the subtle-body level, she is the energetic network of the embodied mind in the subtle channels and vital breath of tantric yoga.

By venerating VajraYoginī as one's "*Yīdam"*, practitioners can cultivate their inner wisdom, mind, and wakefulness. This process of inner cultivation can lead to a sense of enlightenment and empowerment as the practitioner gains a deeper understanding of the nature of reality.

The key point of practicing VajraYoginī is her immeasurable blessings. Just by saying her mantras, we can feel the energy, the emptiness, and the lack of inherent existence of all phenomena. We can generate our mind as the nature of great bliss. In secret mantra, in addition to that emptiness, we can ascertain that our primordial mind is in the nature of great bliss, or "experience the object of great bliss"[53], the exalted wisdom of great bliss, engaged in the

53 Pabongkha Rimpoche & Gonzales, David. "*The Extreme Secret Dakini of Naropa*". Wisdom Publications, 2020. P. 177

ascertainment of emptiness. That is the *ying*, or space, vastness. It is not just the physical space; it represents reality's infinite, boundless openness and the primordial ground of all existence. It is closely tied to the concept of emptiness *(shúnyatā*) in Mahayana Buddhism, but with a more alive, luminous, and creative quality. It is not an empty space but the womb of all manifestations. *Ying* is where all forms, sounds, and thoughts arise and dissolve - like clouds appearing and disappearing in the sky. Tibetan "*Ying"* differs from the Theravada or Zen tradition, which defines *Jing* as the sexual essence or the vital life force. [In Taoism and Theravada meditation, *Jing* is the seed of life; *Ying* is the space of life; *Qi* is the flow of life; and *Shen* is the light of life.] Several Tibetan Mahasiddhis who spent their lives meditating in caves and renouncing all worldly activities were led to the Khechara Pure Land without leaving their bodies.

Another key point of the Vajrayoginī practice is during mental mantra recitation: the practitioner can exercise his winds within the channels, causing the inner heat (*Tummo*) to activate, which will lead to his subtle mindconsciousness transference *(Phowa*) at the time of death.

The Gelug tradition focuses on the "Eleven Yogas" of the Vajrayoginī saddhan*ā*[54], a set of specific practices within the Vajrayogini ritual. These practices involve visualizing the lineage gurus as inseparable from Vajrayoginī and systematically guiding the tantric through visualization, mantra recitation, and meditative absorption, aiming for the clear light and blissful awareness.

iii. While Vajrayoginī's *saddhanā* is practiced in the Sakya and Gelukpa traditions, her other aspect is in the Nyingma and Kagyu traditions, such as *VajraVarahī*. *Vajravarahī* is a red female deity, semi-peaceful/wrathful, standing on one leg in a dancing position with a sow head, which

54 Pabongkha Rimpoche & Gonzales, David. "*The Extreme Secret Dakini of Naropa*". Wisdom Publications, 2020

signifies overcoming mental obscurations. That symbolizes her subjugation to ignorance. [Nor Hall[55] discusses in her book that the pig symbolizes feminine power, intuition, and connection to the earth. She highlights how, in mythology, pigs are often linked to Greek goddesses such as *Demeter*, *Persephone,* and *Circe*, reinforcing their role in cycles of death, rebirth, and transformation.] By using the symbolic sow head, the Vajravahī deity dispels the common notions of filth and greed, transforming the spiritual mind. Her face is adorned with the five skulls representing the Five Wisdom Dakinīs, such as Vajrayoginī. She possesses the same ornaments and vajra weapons as VajraYoginī. While both Gelug and Nyingma traditions deeply honor the practice of Vajrayoginī as an embodiment of enlightened wisdom and compassion, the Nyingma Ancient approach is more fluid and diverse, reflecting its terma-based[56] (revelatory teachings) and Dzogchen-oriented (Great Perfection)[57] shamanic practice. However, Gelug and Sakya practitioners follow a systematically scholarly guided "Eleven Yogas practice", which can be integrated into daily activities.

iv. <u>*Machi Lapdrön*</u>:

Machi Lapdrön, the great *yogīni*, founded the *Chöd*[58] lineage in Tibet. [She was believed to be the emanation of the majestic savior *Tāra.*] She has spent many years isolated in her caves, practicing the gift of the body. Her unique method of cultivating bodhicitta (the mind of enlightenment) is expressed here as the gift of the body. That body gift ritual is not through a physical body cutting, but rather a meditative ritual which combines elements of perfection of

55 Hall, Nor. "*The Moon and the Virgin: Reflections of the Archetypal Feminine".* Harper & Row. New York, 1980
56 Wentz, Evans. "*The Tibetan Book of the Dead". (The Brief Literary History)*
57 Karmapa 9th. "The *Mahamudra eliminating the darkness of ignorance",* 1994
58 Molk, David. " *Chöd in the Ganden Tradition*". Snow Lion Publications. Ithaca. 2006, p. 164

wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*), Mahāmudrā[59], Dzozen[60], and Tibetan shamanic traditions. By offering the illusory body as a feast to all beings, practitioners overcome the fear of death and attachment, purify karma, and develop profound wisdom and compassion; they can eliminate their hindrances by cutting ego-clinging and self-cherishing.

v. <u>*Yeshe Tsogyal*</u>

When Guru Padmasambhava had defeated the Bon Masters by his magical powers, the emperor Trison Detsen of Tibet, out of his profound respect, offered him Yeshe Tsogyal, a Nepalese woman renowned for her beauty and intelligence. Her life was filled with suffering - from being born into an aristocratic family where she was underestimated, to enduring physical abuse and exile, to facing challenges in her spiritual path. Under Gruru Rimpoche's guidance, she underwent rigorous training, engaging in intense meditation, tantric practices, and yogic disciplines. She learnt to resist suffering by using it as a means for awakening. Her famous saying[61] as:

"Whatever obstacles arise, I will take them as signs of progress on the path."
" All phenomena are only tricks of the mind.
I see nothing to fear in inner space.
All this is nothing but clear light's natural radiance; there is nothing at all to react."

It echoes the tantric approach, where obstacles become gateways to enlightenment rather than barriers. She attained enlightenment and played a vital role in transmitting and preserving his teachings, including the hidden treasures known as *terma*[62]. Her spiritual accomplishment was favored by her absolute guru devotion to Padmasambhava, who is indeed nothing more than her

59 Thrangu Rimpoche. "*An Introduction to Mahamudra Meditation*". Namo Buddha Publications. Edmonton, Canada. 2001
60 Rigzin Drolma & Klein, Anne Carolyn. "*Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse".* Snow Lion Publications. Ithaca, New York. 2008
61 Dowman, Keith. "*Sky Dancer: The Secret Life and Songs of the Lady Yeshe Tsogyal*", p. 80
62 Dowman, Keith. "*Sky Dancer: The Secret Life and Songs of the Lady Yeshe Tsogya"l.* p122-124

enlighted wisdom. Her guru devotion and her relationship with her guru symbolize the esoteric balanced union of masculine and feminine principles. Unlike male yogis who often renounced the world, she integrated worldly experiences such as love, suffering, and relationships into her practice. She is regarded as the first Tibetan woman to achieve full enlightenment.

vi. Princess Mandarava

Princess Mandarava was Guru Padmasambhava's second famous Indian consort[63]. She was prophesied as the human emanation Pandarasinī, Buddha Amitabha's consort. At the age of thirteen, she already mastered all sciences: medical science, astrology, and the Tripitakas; she expressed a profound devotion to the dharma, choosing a spiritual path over the privileges of royalty. Her strong motivation to pursue enlightenment despite societal and familial opposition reflects her deep commitment. Like Yeshe Tsogyal, she faced numerous challenges, including persecution and near execution[64]. Her father, King Vihadhara, wrongly believed her relationship with Guru Padmasambhava had set him on fire and imprisoned her. Guru Rimpoche magically transformed the flames into a sesame lake. She engaged in advanced tantric practices alongside her guru, particularly at the Maratika Cave[65], where they realized immortality. Her role model of engaging in advanced tantric practices and qualities makes her an enduring symbol of feminine wisdom and enlightened power within the Vajrayana tradition.

63 Lama Sonam & Sangye Khandro. "*The Lives and Liberation of Princess Mandarava".* Wisdom Publications. 2015. P. 8

64 Lama Sonam & Sangye Khandro. "*The Lives and Liberation of Princess Mandarava".* Wisdom Publications. 2015, p.135-140

65 Lama Sonam & Sangye Khandro. "*The Lives and Liberation of Princess Mandarava"*. P. 151-153

vii. Samantabhadrī:

Another significant female figure in Dzogchen Buddhism is Samantabhadrī, the primordial female Buddha and the consort of Samantabhadra[66]. Her naked female aspect with long hair, embracing the Buddha Samantabhadra, symbolizes the union of wisdom and skillful method for the ultimate nature of reality. Unlike other female deities adorned with jewels and vajra weapons, Samantabhadrī is often described as a simple, naked figure, symbolizing her complete freedom from conceptual interpretations and attachment. Her nakedness represents the pure, unobstructed nature of awareness. As the embodiment of primordial wisdom, she is metaphorically called the "Mother of All Buddhas," as all enlightened beings arise from realizing emptiness and wisdom.

viii. Reflection:

The narratives of the above female deities provide a roadmap for anyone on the spiritual path. Their journey shows that enlightenment is not about rejecting the world, but fully embracing it with wisdom and compassion. They did not resist suffering or hardship; instead, they used it to awaken. They embody the qualities of devotion, perseverance, and realization of the dakinī, a symbol of wisdom and liberated energy in Vajrayana Buddhism. However, we notice that tantric female practitioners have a noble origin. They came from royal families, possessed outstanding beauty, intelligence, and most of all a fervent faith in dharma practice. That explained that they have accumulated tremendous merits from their past lives and were already good Buddhist devotees. So, I believe that their meeting with a qualified tantric guru for genuine guidance is not a coincidence.

66 Samantabhadra is Phật Phổ Hiền in Vietnamese.

Chapter Seven**: Essence of Vajrayana**

The essence of Vajrayana is so vast and profound that it can be elaborated in a whole book. As a beginner, I can only present a glimpse of its core concepts, such as the non-duality concept, Tonglen meditation, Chöd bodhicitta giving practice, Phowa practice, and yab-yum union. Many of the concepts introduced below are sometimes essentialized as female or feminine.

i. Non-duality concept:

a. The concept of non-duality (*dbye med*) is the core of Tibetan meditation philosophy; it refers to the ultimate nature of reality beyond conventional concepts, such as self and other, subject and object, or existence and non-existence.

When the Dzogchen master Nyoshul Khen Rimpoche[67] sang to his mother:

Look outward at the appearing objects,
And like the water in a mirage,
They are more delusive than delusion.
Unreal-like dreams and illusions,
They resemble a reflected moon and a rainbow.

Look inward at your own mind!
It seems pretty exciting when not examined.
But when examined, there is nothing but emptiness.
It cannot be identified by saying, "That's it!"
But it has an evanescent scent and is elusive like mist.

It illustrates that Tantricas must become accustomed to the *vast openness of the ultimate nature* experience. In the Dzogchen context, we can understand the *ying* (open expanse) through the analogy of a cloudless sky. Still, we realize the *ying* through the practice of actually

67 Omniscient Longchenga, Lama Chönam & Sangye Khandro. "*Jewel Treasure of the Dharmadhātu"*. Ligt of Berotsana. 2024

contemplating the cloudless sky. When we gaze deeply into the cloudless sky, there is a tremendous capacity to experience the nature of the mind, the inner *ying,* the actual discovery of space. It is the spaciousness of the awareness itself. When recognizing the *ying* in meditation, a natural knowing quality develops the *yeshe* (or primordial wisdom); it is direct, effortless knowing that does not require analysis. So, the non-duality nature of reality is just the union of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and clarity (*rigpa*). Duality is just an illusion arising from the conceptual mind, while the true nature of the mind is described as spontaneous, luminous awareness, free from conceptual manifestation.

b. The Kagyu tradition teaches the Mahāmudrā meditation for direct experience of reality beyond conceptual dualities, for the non-duality of emptiness and awareness. Their approach consists of calming the mind using Shamatha (breath awareness), then practicing Vipashyana (insight) by observing the space between thoughts, and finally letting the mind realize the inseparability of clarity and emptiness. Mahāmudrā can be defined in the formula of non-dual knowledge (*rigpa)* and pure pleasure (*bde chen*) in an inherent existential state of being (*dharmakāya*). Practitioners learn to gradually dissolve their conceptual mind, stabilize the clarity before realizing special insight, and then attain the union of clarity and emptiness.

c. The Yogācāra (Mind-Only) or Cittamātra school emphasizes that the reality is only mental manifestations between the internal observer and the external world. Vasubandhu[68] in "*Treatise on Three Natures"* explains the three levels of perception (*trisvabhāva*): imagined, dependent, and perfected, and helps to understand the non-duality of subject and object in experience. Bodhisattva Maitreya in *Dharmadharmatāvibhaṅga*[69] teaches the nature of mind and how wisdom sees beyond dualistic perception. His teaching is primarily concerned with

68 Vasubandhu is a Buddhist philospher, follower of Abhidarma teachings, then later converted to Mahāyāna under the influence of his half brother Asanga.
69 One of the Five Treatises (*Pañcaskandhakaśāstra*) transmitted by Asanga (*Phân Biện Luận*)

distinguishing between phenomena (dharma) and the ultimate nature of phenomena (dharmatā), the emptiness and luminous awareness that transcend conceptual elaboration (*parinispanna)*.

d. Rooted in Nāgārjuna's teachings, the Madhyamaka (*dhu ma)* philosophers in the Prasangika school believed that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence (*śūnyatā).* His Holiness the Dalai Lama frequently cited the 24th chapter of the *Mūlanadyamakākarikā*[70]*:*

> "*That which arises dependently, we explain as emptiness.*
> *This emptiness is dependently designated. This is the middle way.*
> *Because there is phenomenon, that is not a dependent arsing.*
> *There is no phenomenon that is not empty."*

This emptiness concept does not mean that nothing exists, but phenomena exist dependently. The ultimate reality is empty of itself, i.e. it has no inherent existence. Je TsongKhapa[71]'s practice consisted of clarifying Madhyamaka philosophy, integrating Sutra and Tantra in a structured and ethical way. His hand mudra expresses the rubric image of non-duality, with his right hand crossing over his left hand, representing the union of vast method and profound wisdom. [Method integrates compassion and ethical conduct in practice; wisdom is the realization of emptiness.]

Which path to choose? Practitioners who enjoy logical analysis, follow the Madhyamaka Middle Way school, do analytical meditations, and realize non-duality and emptiness through dependent origination. Those who prefer shamanic teachings, using direct experience, apply the Dzogchen Mahāmudra meditation. Cittamātrins who are fascinated by mind-only philosophy dive into the Yogācāra school, and realize the perfected nature (parinispanňa)

70 'Kinh Trung Quán Luận' in Vietnamese
71 Je Tsong Khapa from the 14th century, is the founder of the Gelug school, known as the "yellow hat" school.

ii. '*Tonglen*' concept:

According to Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the great Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna received the *terma* texts from the Nagas, serpent-like beings who dwell in the ocean and possess mystical knowledge; he transmitted the *Prajnaparamita Sutras* in a more incisive presentation of the Buddha's teaching about the Middle Way. In addition to establishing the philosophical view of the Madhyamika School, he taught methods for developing compassion and bodhicitta, that is, the commitment to follow the Buddha's path to enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. His verse in the *Precious Garland*[72]*:*

> *"May I be beloved of beings, and may they*
> *be more beloved to me than myself.*
> *May I bear the results of their negativity?*
> *And may they have the results of my virtue."*

That verse is the source of the "*Tonglen*" practice, known as exchanging self-interest for the interest-of-others, which is used to develop the precious mind of bodhicitta. It is a compassionate practice where the practitioner's meditation involves opening their heart to the pain of others by breathing in their suffering, and offering relief by breathing out their positive energy. It's a way of sending out love and compassion, and reversing the habitual tendency to avoid discomfort and clinging to personal comfort.

iii. Feminism emphasis:

Unlike other Buddhist traditions, Vajrayana has a unique approach to gender, power, and realization. While Tibetan Buddhist institutions have historically been patriarchal, Vajrayana teachings contain profoundly egalitarian and even feminist elements. Only mothers can nurse

72 Hopkins, Jeffrey. *"Nāgārjuna's Precious Garland".* Snow Lion Publications. Boulder. 1998. Chapter 5

their children with their milk, and practicing giving is natural for women; thus, bodhicitta giving can become a genuine practice. Dzogchen (Great Perfection) tradition emphasizes that it is the ultimate feminine principle of the inseparable space-wakefulness, *ying-yeshe*. It is also the secret nature of the Great Mother in the *Chöd* tradition.

Kusali merit cultivation and *Chöd* Bodhicitta Giving:

When Buddha taught us about the Six Paramitas, he intended to guide us to eradicate two types of self-attachment, sever the two kinds of death, and transcend the ocean of suffering. The first Paramita is the Perfection of generosity (*dana*), and the last Paramita is the wisdom Paramita (*prājna*). These are two types of Paramitas that tantricas need to practice for *Kusali* merit accumulation.

The first is attachment to one's own body, the extension of which is our concept of lifespan. The five aggregates (*skandhas*)—material and mental factors that lead to our senses—are the fundamental sources of our mental afflictions. The second type of self-attachment is aversion to the afflictions and sufferings of worldly existence. There are many ways to practice generosity: by giving away tangible and intangible properties, body parts, or dharma speech. From the *jātaka tales*[73] of Buddha's past lives, in one lifetime, he was a prince who, out of great compassion, gave his body and blood to a hungry tigress and her five cubs when he saw them. That was an act of *ultimate bodhicitta*. The whole world trembled at his act. I even cried and cried again when I read that story, and I made a sincere wish to follow his example in this life and future lives until enlightenment.

Some Buddhist practitioners use the blood from their fingers to write dharma texts. People do self-immolation for a great cause, whether it be religion or humanity. Some people may abuse that sacred cause for political purposes. In 1963, the story of the Vietnamese monk

73 *Khuddaka Nikaya of the Sutta Pitaka* (Buddha birth stories)

Thích Quảng Đức's self-immolation caused global shock. Conventionally, people think the motive was to sacrifice his body as the "bodhi storch" to protest the Buddhist practice discrimination by the government. In reality, a dark force orchestrated the fire for political turmoil, leading to the revolution of the first democracy of Vietnam. If that monk let himself be burnt with a bodhicitta mind, some auspicious signs would appear, like the earth trembling, birds flying, or a rainbow in the sky. Hundreds of Tibetan monks, nuns, and even lay people have self-immolated to protest the Communist Chinese Party since May 2022. Any constructive result? The CCP government has become impervious and irresponsible to humanity's cause. That's why we need to practice generosity with wisdom. His Holiness the Dalai Lama often warned of bodily sacrifice, which is associated with the training of high bodhisattvas and is not suitable for beginning dharma practitioners.

Kusali[74] *meditation* in Tibetan tradition refers to the practice of profound generosity and renunciation. It involves visualizing the offering on one's body (gift of body or *lus-sbyin*) as a feast *(ganachakra*) to enlightened beings, protectors, and even demonic forces. In one yoga of the eleven yogas Vajrayoginī practice, the tantrica meditates on her consciousness as her inner *yidam*, leaving her body out of the central channel, coming back to her dead body, cutting it in pieces, transforming it into ambrosia with vajra fire and mantras for inner offerings to the local spirits, and obstructive spirits of different realms. The *Chöd* of Machi Lhadrön, with the same bodhicitta giving mind practice is often performed with rigorous rituals on charnel grounds, in cemeteries, or other frightening places to confront fear directly.

74 The term *Kusali* (*sku gsas li*) generally means "mendicant" or"one who has renounced worldly attachments

Benefits of *Chöd* Ritual Practice*:*

a. By offering one's body to spirits and demons, the practitioner realizes there is nothing to protect; thus, fear naturally dissolves.

b. With habitual meditation, this practice leads to the realization that the body, mind, and all phenomena are empty of inherent existence.

c. This practice accumulates boundless generosity. Practitioners naturally develop a mindset of selflessness and gratitude.

d. That self-offering process destroys karmic imprints tied to attachment, aversion, and ignorance. It pacifies harmful influences, including illnesses believed to be caused by karmic debts or negative forces.

e. Conventionally, people fear death, illness, and aging; *Chöd* helps practitioners confront these fears and let go. It strengthens the mind's ability to face challenges with equanimity.

f. Practicing self-offering weakens attachment to the physical body and allows acceptance of impermanence.

g. *Chöd* helps process deep fears, past traumas, and subconscious anxieties by directly facing them. Physiologically, our melatonin level increases, and our bloodstream becomes less obstructed.

h. It creates an open mind and helps reduce over-identification with suffering and hindrances like greed, jealousy, and anger.

i. On a mystical level, harmful beings turn into allies, and suffering into an opportunity for wisdom and compassion. It leads to deep states of meditation and samatha. It cuts through mental distractions and enhances clarity of mind. Machig Ladrön's famous words:

> "*If you have no fear, the demons become protectors.*
> *If you cling to nothing, all obstacles dissolve.*"

iv. Phowa Practice (*'pho ba*)

Phowa is a ritual of ejection/transference of consciousness, training for the dying process. *Chöd* practitioners often train meditative absorption to shoot their subtle consciousness out of the central psychic channel to the Dewachen Amitabha Pure Land or the Khechara Pure Land by reciting mantras and visualization. They visualize receiving the *yidam's* blessing for the purification of their hindrances, bringing energy wind into the central channel (*shushuma)* by activating the heat *tummo kundalini* which initiates the pervading wind (*Bhastrika / Kapalabhati)* to blow up to the heart chakra, where the subtle mind consciousness is stored. That ejection of consciousness is one of the Six Yogas of Naropa[75]. This training is part of the completion stage of Tantra (*dzogrim)* and has to be guided by a qualified tantric master.

v. The tantric union "*Yab-Yum*":

Tibetan thangkas (sacred Buddhist paintings) sometimes depict *sexual union* as part of *Yab-Yum* imagery, which symbolizes the union of wisdom and compassion. These images feature a male deity (Yab, meaning "father") in an embrace with a female consort (Yum, meaning "mother"). While it may appear as erotic art, its meaning is profoundly spiritual; it represents the merging of opposites—method (*upaya*) and wisdom (*prajna*), bliss and emptiness - essential for enlightenment in Vajrayana Buddhism[76]. The male figure (*Daka*) represents compassion, skillful means, and active energy, while the female consort (*Dakinī*) represents wisdom, insight, and passive receptive energy. Their union symbolizes the non-dual nature of

75 Mullin, Glen H. "*Tsongkhapa's Six Yogas of Naropa*". Snow Lion Publications. Ithaca, New York. 1996

76 Woodoffe, John. "*The Tantric Tradition".* Published by Samuel Weiser. New York, 1975. Kundalini section.

reality, where wisdom and compassion merge to transcend dualistic perception defined as a higher state of consciousness.

Discussion: Conventional minds see that union as sexual. However, the ultimate minds see it as a mystical experience of enlightenment. That concept is unique in Highest Yoga Tantra (*Anuttarayoga Tantra*) Tibetan teachings, where sexual imagery represents inner transformation and the realization of emptiness (*súnyata*), and tantricas practice to visualize such imagery in advanced meditation to dissolve dualistic perceptions. Most Mahayana practitioners have adverse opinions about that imagery, saying tantricas are unethical, immoral, and delusional, and their practice is impure and different from Buddha's sutras. However, only high lamas who can subdue all their mental defilements can practice mixing with their imaginary consort's energy for the divine union. Before Guru Rimpoche bestowed the three initiations of body, speech, and mind to Yeshe Tsogyal, he explained the nature of his desire[77]:

> "*I am free of any germ of desire whatsoever; the aberrations of lust are absent. Have no desire for what you see. Desire not; desire not. Have no desire for desire. Desire and freedom are simultaneous.*"

Padmasambhava's teachings involve balancing **male and female energies** as a core aspect of spiritual practice, where desire is completely absent. This balance is not simply about gender but represents the union of complementary principles within the practitioner's mind and experience.

Another characteristic of a tantric symbol is that the metaphorical interpretation of daka-dakinī union is their wrathful appearances, representing the transformation of destructive emotions like anger, hatred, or fear into enlightened wisdom and compassion. These deities embody the powerful force required to overcome ignorance and obstacles. The fierce expressions and dynamic postures symbolize the practitioner's fearless confrontation with inner and outer demons, which are the attachments, delusions, and ignorance obstructing enlightenment. Many

77 Dowman, Keith. "*Sky Dancer: The Secret Life and Songs of the Lady Yeshe Tsogyal*". P. 261

wrathful deities serve as protectors of the Dharma and its practitioners. Their intimidating appearance wards off negative forces and malicious entities, offering protection.

Examples of *Yab-yum* deities statues are Chakrasamvara with Vajravarahī, Heruka with Vajrayoginī, and Samantabhadra[78] with Samantabhadrī. The father deities (*yab*) represent the active, compassionate aspect of realization, while the mother deities (*yum*) embody wisdom and inspiration, guiding practitioners toward enlightenment. Mixing the energies of father and mother generate great bliss, a subtle level of consciousness in which one can experience the emptiness of reality.

This narrative cites only a few characteristics of the generation stage of Vajrayana Buddhism. To engage in the pathway to Buddhahood, the tantrica must advance further on the completion stage and the ten Bhumi Grounds. In the completion stage (*dzogrim*), he will train on the isolating of the body *kāya-viveka*), the speech (*vāk-viveka*), and the mind (*citta-viveka*), the stage of illusory body (*māyādeha*), and of clear light. This stage can only be practiced under the guidance of a qualified tantric master. My learning is still primitive; I can only practice the Bodhisattva path, which includes the Three Principles of the Path (renunciation, bodhicitta, and the wisdom of Emptiness), the Six Perfections (Paramitas), and the Mahāmudrā meditation combined with Tonglen. Besides, I must keep vows (*samaya*) seriously, because breaking tantric vows can slow my spiritual progress. If for any reason, I miss any commitment, I have to practice purification through confession to the 35 Buddhas. Deity yoga and guru devotion are also considered in all daily activities. Tantra is a lifelong journey, not a quick fix; I cannot expect any fruit soon. All the mahāsiddhis must have practiced many, many lifetimes to reach that

78 Pic on website. https://www.himalayanart.org/ ‘ Phật Phổ Hiền’ in Vietnamese

Buddhahood. I just pray to be led at death to the Kecharī Pure Land, described as a blissful Pure Land, and to be reborn as a woman for helping all sentient beings.

In this chapter, Tulku Ulgyen Rimpoche, Keith Downan, and Tsultrim Allone shared their fundamental principles of Tantra practice, which include bodhicitta giving Chöd practice as well as the mixing of male and female energies for the ultimate wisdom of *sunyatā* and bliss.

Chapter Eight: **Future of Buddhist Women**

In contrast to Buddha Sakyamuni, who initially was reluctant to allow women in the Sangha order, saying that women's hindrances are obstacles to men's enlightenment, Padmasambhava[79], who was considered the Second Buddha in the 8th century, spoke very highly of women's capacities for enlightenment. He emphasized that women have the same, if not more significant, potential for awakening as men, particularly in the context of Vajrayana Buddhism. He has stated that:

"being born in a female body does not hinder spiritual enlightenment."

He suggested*:*

"that women have an advantage because of their natural connection to wisdom and love; if a woman is willing to commit, she can attain enlightenment even faster than a man."

He always encouraged his female disciples, calling the belief that women are spiritually inferior a false view. We might interpret that the different gender approach may originate from their respective times' social and cultural contexts. Śākyamuni Buddha lived in a highly conservative society in Ancient India, while Guru Rimpoche operated in a later historical period with more esoteric and inclusive spiritual perspectives. By these two approaches, we can see an evolution of gender cultural concepts, a transformation of stereotypes, and an open mind and respect for women's engagement in a spiritual path.

By his guidance, Guru Rimpoche's teachings broke societal norms by affirming that women have equal, and even superior potential for realization in Vajrayana. His recognition of Yeshe Tsogyal as an enlightened master set a powerful example, showing that women could attain the highest spiritual realizations. Her spiritual journey challenges the notion that enlightenment was reserved for monks and men. Her realization directly counters patriarchal

79 Dowman, Keith. "*Sky Dancer: The Secret Life and Songs of the Lady Yeshe Tsogyal*". Shambala Publications. 1996. p. 24

views of her time and remains a powerful message for spiritual equality. Yeshe Tsogyel's life proves to be a role model that spiritual enlightenment is for all, not just for men or monastics. Her story did not end with her physical life; her teachings and presence remain alive in Tibetan Buddhism, inspiring generations of modern practitioners, especially in the West, where lay women prefer the Vajrayana practice, which suits their financial independence and societal living, instead of monastic obligations. Thanks to notable American-Tibetan translators like Jeffrey Hopkins, Robert A.F. Thurman, Alan Wallace, and Anne Carolyn Klein (as Lama Rigzin Drolma), Western women who live a modern life like working, paying bills and at the same time engage in on spiritual path, find the Tantra practice more suitable because of no restriction of the monastic rules, and the Chod ritual as a mothering and nurturing practice of Boddhicitta.

i. Contemporary efforts toward gender equality:

As enlightenment is the ultimate goal for Buddhist practitioners, they need to practice uprooting attachment, aversion, and ignorance. That effort requires pure motivation, dedication and perseverance. Women determined to renounce repeated rebirths in cyclic existence, by their practice with sincerity and diligence, gain respect as spiritual guides; however, their involvement in religious leadership tasks may be seen as a diversion. Nurturing the spiritual life of sentient beings demands creating spiritual communities, so the functions of running a monastery or a retreat center can disrupts the schedule of a person who engages in intensive spiritual practice.. Some may have adverse judgments toward women in leading roles instead of self-realization through humility and isolation. However, truly enlightened leadership, from a Buddhist perspective, is eradicating the delusions of the mind. It may manifest as gentleness rather than power, loving kindness rather than competency, compassion rather than efficiency. In the

Vajrayana tolerance context for compassionate and wrathful qualities, women who follow a tantric path can be accepted as spiritual leaders: Jetsuma Tenzin Palmo[80], a British nun, who has inspired the world by her 12 years story searching for the reality, fighting death during an avalanche, in a solitary retreat inside a cave of the Himalyas, is now both an internationally acclaimed Buddhist teacher and founder of Dongyu Gatsal Ling Monastery in North India, or Her Eminence Mindrolling Jetsün Khandro Rimpoche, who was recognized as a dakini emanation. Besides receiving traditional training for male teachers, Jetsün Khandro Rimpoche excelled in journalism, business management, homeopathy, and sciences. She establishes a reputation as an uncompromising, an untraditional teacher who is never afraid to make changes, due to her outstanding education and training, and her main concern is taking responsibility and affirming the role of women in Buddhist society. Other modern spiritual female archetype leaders like Khandro Tseringma Rimpoche, and Bhikkhuni Dammananda have inspired efforts to challenge traditional limitations and empower Buddhist women worldwide. Therefore, giving eloquent speeches, educating, and empowering women is at the core of their work. Mindrolling Jetsün Khandro Rimpoche's vision, as stated in her teaching,

"Maybe I can be a medium through which more women become confident, dynamic leaders," reflects her hidden modesty but brave character in facing all challenges to help her Buddhist disciples.

80 Mackenzie, Vicki. "*Un ermitage dans la neige".* Carisse Busquet, 2003.
- Mackenzie, Vicki. "*Cave in the snow: A western Woman's quest for enlightenment"*, London, Bloomsbury 1999

ii. Education and scholarship:

Many Buddhist women have pursued higher education and become respected scholars, using their voices to challenge interpretations of scriptures that still reflect inequality. Scholars such as Rita Gross and Karma Lekshe Tsomo have made contributions in re-reading texts through a gender-equal lens.

While challenges remain, women continue to expand their efforts to reinstate full monastic rights and promote leadership opportunities so they can become the "Buddha's Daughters" in a dynamic and progressive modern style. As some Buddhist communities continue to address gender-based disparities, their contributions are proofs of the evolution of spiritual and social traditions.

iii. Existence of female communities:

Where traditional structures are limited, women have founded their communities, retreat centers, and monasteries where they can practice and teach freely. Bikkhuni Thubten Chodron established the Sravasti Abbey in Washington, Ajahn Sundarā and Ajahn Bodhipālā at Amaravati Monastery in England.

iv. Global Solidarity:

Recently, there has been a global movement to restore full ordination for women and solve gender inequalities in Buddhist communities. Buddhist women have more access to education, and activists for women's rights are expanding. Organizations such as *Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist* Women have been at the forefront of advocating for women's rights in Buddhism. The revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Theravāda and Tibetan

traditions marks a significant milestone in this movement. Furthermore, modern Buddhist women, both monastic and lay, are taking on leadership roles, engaging in scholarship, and contributing to social activism.

Great leaders like Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, Mindrolling Jetsun Khandro Rimpoche, and Bhikkhuni Dammananda have inspired efforts to challenge traditional limitations and empower Buddhist women worldwide. Besides the objectives of adjusting the women's full ordination rights and education, the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women supports projects related to poverty alleviation, healthcare, and education, particularly for Buddhist women in developing countries. Not least, it fosters a global network of Buddhist women, encouraging collaboration and understanding across different traditions and cultures.

Even Vajrayana Buddhism recognizes feminine principles and the potential for non-dual understanding of gender, historical and cultural structures still have limited roles of women. While challenges remain, the ongoing efforts to reinstate full monastic rights and promote leadership opportunities for women reflect Buddhism's dynamic and progressive nature. As Buddhist communities continue to address gender-based disparities, women's contributions will remain vital to the traditions' spiritual and social landscape.

Chapter Nine**: CONCLUSION**

Over the years, Buddhist women have faced gender disparity within various cultures regarding education, ordination, and leadership roles. Their role has evolved gradually from primitive Buddhism toward greater gender equality. There is still a gender-disparity gap in developing countries; challenges remain in some communities. Despite these challenges, many women have found ways to cope with and resist gender inequality through spiritual practice, activism, and community strength-building.

i. Spiritual resilience and practice:

On the individual level, many Buddhist women turn to personal practices such as meditation, reading dharma texts, chanting, and mindfulness as a source of inner strength. Even within patriarchal systems, these practices give them self-confidence, self-worth, and peace. As the Buddha's teachings emphasize the potential for all beings to attain enlightenment, some women draw strength from this crucial idea, seeing spiritual liberation beyond gender. There is no glass ceiling like in the business era. Since they believe in the law of karma, they face their challenges with calmness and progress on the eightfold path with disciplined morality. They develop self-confidence, self-motivation, and faith in the *Divine Mother*'s blessing. They bravely face challenges or obstacles, turning adverse conditions into stepping stones to strengthen their faith in the divine beings. Our guru has said that in the degenerate time, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are coming to our world to give more blessings to good practitioners.

ii. Reclaiming historical narratives:

On the community level, educated bhikkhunis and lay businesswomen are contributing great efforts to closing the barrier of gender-based disparities. To reclaim female voices in Buddhism, they have highlighted stories of early Buddhist nuns, such as those in the *Therīgāthā* (collection of verses by elder nuns). They look at some role models of notable Buddhist figures like Mahapajapati Gotami (the Buddha's aunt and foster mother), Yeshe Tsogyal, Damo Prajñātārā (an early female in the Zen tradition), and modern figures like Pema Chödrön (USA), Ayya Khema (Germany), Bikkhuni Thubten Chodrom (founder of Sravasti Abbey in U.S), and many more…inspiring women in the Buddhist world.

iii. Community and global support:

Thanks to local nunneries and global organizations like *Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women,* women make their voices heard through online platforms where they share their experiences, teachings, and financial support. With the expansion of multimedia like Facebook, YouTube, and Zoom meetings, the distance to education and information sharing no longer poses problems.

In some regions where traditional gender norms are vigorously enforced, women often find subtle or culturally sensitive ways to resist or circumvent restrictions. The notable Thai Bikkhuni Dahammananda traveled to Sri Lanka for full ordination and established Songdhammakalyani Monastery, which gained international support[81] and growing recognition

81 Cadigan, Hilary. "*White Robes, Saffron Dreams: A Look at Gender Inequality in Thai Buddhism".* June 6, 2014. *http://www.chiangmaicitynews.com/news.php?id=3984*

in Thailand. The British Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo founded Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery in India to support higher education for nuns.

With His Holiness Dalai Lama's support, organizations like the Tibetan Nuns Project provide education, accommodation, and spiritual training (Geshema exam) for Tibetan refugee nuns. The blog[82] "*She's the Man: Buddhism, Gender, and the Controversies Surrounding the 15thDalai Lama*" discusses the broader implications of gender in Tibetan Buddhism, including the debates surrounding the potential for a female Dalai Lama and the efforts of organizations like Sakyadhita in advocating for women's roles in Buddhism.

Our karma, whether good or bad, originates from the good or bad deeds of past lives. It is up to each individual who wishes to end the repeated cycles and seek liberation to do so through intensive negativity purification and merit accumulation, by practicing the Ten Practices theory in Mahayana Buddhism or the Ngöndro of Tibetan Tantra.

iv. Internal Transformation and Direct Experience

If we have pure intentions and good motivation, we can all attain enlightenment. Our mind is neither male nor female, and that consciousness can continue through cyclic existence. Nguyễn Bá Học, the Vietnamese philosopher, was famous for his statement :

"Đường đi khó, không khó vì ngăn sông cách núi mà khó vì lòng người ngại núi e sông"

It affirms to us that walking the path does not pose any difficulty; the difficulty resides in the fearful mind of crossing through mountains and rivers. The French idiom "*Vouloir, c'est pouvoir"* also affirms that any achievement must accompany a strong will.

82 Harrison-Clarke. "*She's the Man: Buddhism, Gender, and the Controversies Surrounding the 15th Dalai Lama"*. October 31, 2024. The Religion Factor.

Women have to overcome the traditional inferiority complex to gain their self-confidence by looking at role models. Nowadays, we have female astronauts like Karsen Kitchen (only 21 years old), Sharon Hagle, Amanda Nguyen (the first Vietnamese-American in space), Sunita L. Williams, Katy Perry… Buddhist women should look to the inspiring stories of the *Dragon King's daughter,* who instantly transforms into a male and attains Buddhahood, and Queen Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, who leads five noblewomen in requesting the Buddha's permission to join the Sangha. They should also consider the hardship of Yeshe Tsyogyal, who endures famine, cold, and isolation for Mahamudra meditation. They must focus on embodied mindfulness and compassion practices to overcome internalized inferiority, learning to regard their bodies and minds with dignity and awareness, rather than shame.

- Insight into No-self (Anattā): Buddhism teaches that identity (gender identity) is only a mental fabrication. By realizing *anattā*, we see through conditioned notions of inferiority and superiority.
- Direct Practice: Through meditation, ethical discipline, and wisdom, women, or all practitioners, gradually loosen the grip of societal conditioning. As they have direct insight into reality, they clearly see the internal structures of self-doubt.

v. Notable similarities between the Dao and the Vajrayana Tibetan

Regarding the *yab-yum* union concept mentioned in the previous chapter, I like to note the similarities between the idea of male-female energy harmony in the Vajrayana Tibetan Buddhist practice and Chinese *yin-yang* philosophy. The Daoist religion's goal is balance and harmony, dynamic equilibrium, health, and flourishing; it is the concept of Qi flow and balance in the body. Yin and Yang are complementary forces, not opposites, but interdependent aspects of reality. The Tibetan Vajrayana's goal of the *yab-yum* union has a deeper meaning: it is to transcend duality and experience non-dual awareness for enlightenment, using the method of subtle body practice with the channels, chakras, and *prana* (*or winds*), while also developing the compassion method and wisdom that realizes emptiness. It is a union of dualistic perceptions that helps realize the ultimate reality within the Wheel of Time, which encompasses Bliss and Emptiness. Both concepts see the human body as a mirror of the cosmos.

In conclusion, we can say that there is no gender difference concerning spiritual achievement. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, considered a universal Buddhist leader, broke down that barrier by saying he would be reincarnated in a female human form to continue the legacy of the Dalai Lama. By this statement, he affirms the possibility of women's spiritual leadership role.

Buddhahood has multiple pathways to enlightenment. Men and Women have the same potential. It is a false view to say which method is superior to the other. Tibetan monastics study Sutra and Tantra. They are complementary to each other. It depends on each individual to find a qualified teacher and a suitable method that is adaptable to their conditions, motivation and aspirations. I feel fortunate to have met the right spiritual Guru. I was challenged by financial hardship, emotional disruptions caused by cultural gaps with my husband and coworkers. Still, since I keep my strong faith in him, I continue to practice the Three Aspects of the Path from Je Tsong Khapa's Lamrim Chenmo, which prepared me for the Tantric path of Tibetan Buddhism. And the more I practice, the more I develop an open mind and a loving kindness to all, and I see all phenomena as a dream.

I dedicate all efforts in reading, anlyzing, and condensing this thesis into a presentable outline: to the long life of my spiritual gurus and their great wishes to be fulfilled, to world peace, to the enlightenment of all sentient beings, to the flourishing of Dharma in the universe. And I wish to attain Buddhahood so I can help all beings like my Gurus.

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